MICHIGAN LAWYERS WEEKLY
www.milawyersweekly.com
February 12, 2007
[Part 4 in a series of 4]

Client satisfaction surveys: Responding to negative feedback and converting positive feedback into more business

Law Firm Management

By Jeffrey A. Miiller

The final, and most significant, step in your client satisfaction survey initiative is to follow up on all survey responses. Many lawyers who conduct surveys do nothing with the feedback, and reasons vary as to why. Perhaps the servicing partner is uncomfortable about a particular criticism and is not clear how to solve the problem, or maybe the marketing director drops the ball by not managing the follow-up.

There is no excuse for not responding to your reconnaissance.

If you have no intention of responding to both negative and positive feedback, do not conduct a client satisfaction survey. You must demonstrate that you take your client's preferences and problems seriously.

What's more, survey feedback is an opportunity to maximize the client relationship through improved service and/or increased profitability.

Strategize your follow up

With each completed survey, create an action plan. Identify and prioritize key issues: Did the client express an essential need or concern? Was an issue mentioned more than once?

When a client repeats a point, it usually indicates they feel unheard and the issue needs further discussion.

Do any of the survey comments need clarification? Only when you fully understand what the client is saying can you then identify the next step. Detail how you plan to resolve the issue(s). Schedule a date when you will communicate this plan to your client, then commit to the deadline.

Regarding negative feedback

Always respond to negative survey feedback first. Here are practical, and appropriate, steps to take when following up on negative feedback.

• Personally call the client within 24 hours: It has more meaning if the servicing partner calls the client directly as opposed to another representative of the firm making the call.

If the complaint is severe, offer to meet with the client at their office to discuss and resolve the issue.

The idea here is to demonstrate that the client's satisfaction is of utmost importance.

• Thank the client: Tell the client that you appreciate them taking the time to participate in your survey.

• Clarify their perceptions: Survey responses may not reveal the whole story or give you a clear understanding of the problem. Now is your chance to say to the client, "Tell me more. Can you elaborate?" Encourage the client to be candid.

Clarity will improve your ability to solve problems with effective solutions.

• Apologize and make an offer to recompense: An apology without an offer to make up for it may not be enough. Make amends.

Consider the law firm that made a substantial error on a matter. They offered to deduct 10 percent off the fee for the next matter. The shareholders came up with this figure as a result of asking themselves, "What is it worth to us to keep this client?"

• Negotiate with the client how you plan to repair the problem: Be specific about your objective. Get buy-in from the client so they leave the conversation with a clear understanding of what will happen next.

Negotiation not only shows that you have given your client's feedback considerable thought, but demonstrates flexibility on your part and reinforces the image of an equal partnership.

• Communicate any client service changes to your team: If the client has interaction with several members of your firm, make sure that everyone understands the changes being made and see that they commit to them.

• Schedule a follow-up survey: Confirm the problem has been solved, or if you need to keep working on it. A follow up survey demonstrates your sincerity and helps to insure the changes that have been installed are effective.

The length of time to wait before doing a follow-up survey will depend on several factors, including how much interaction you have with the client; how easy it is to solve the problem; and how quickly you are confident the problem has been solved.

Clients' issues

Regardless of the issue, each comment of dissatisfaction must be addressed with empathy and a clear explanation as to how you will repair the problem.

What follows are commonly exposed issues and practical strategies to deal with them.

• Responsiveness: This is the most frequent issue of dissatisfaction. Attorneys are notorious for not returning phone calls and emails promptly.

Follow-up actions — Clarify what the client's expectations are, then communicate how you will improve responsiveness.

Be specific. For example, "I will return your call by five o'clock the same day. If I'm not available, my secretary will call you and give a number where you can reach me or schedule an appointment for the following morning. Will that work for you?"

Get their buy in, and make sure your team understands and commits to these changes.

• Billing: Sometimes a client is unable to understand the bills, or they feel there are inaccuracies or overcharges.

Follow-up actions — Review the bill in detail with the client. Talking about the bill is an opportunity to remind the client of the value they are receiving.

Offer a periodic status report on all activities, fees and potential increases in fees. In other words, do a better job of managing you client's expectations regarding the bills.

• Understanding clients' goals: A client may feel their attorney is not up-to-speed on their business needs and/or their company's goals.

Follow-up actions — Meet with your client's key decision makers to discuss their short and long-term goals and how you can help the client achieve them. A client may be unaware that your firm could provide additional services.

Further interaction gives you the opportunity to prove your understanding of their needs.

• Understanding a client's industry — An attorney who prided himself on being extremely knowledgeable about the manufacturing industry did surveys and got low marks from his clients about his industry knowledge. The attorney, who was shocked to hear this, clearly needed to demonstrate a higher level of expertise.

Follow-up actions — Do seminars for the industry's trade organizations and publish articles in industry trade journals.

Also, become active in the trade organizations of that industry and take a leadership role.

• Complaint about a staff person / partner: Clarify the reason(s) for the client's dissatisfaction. Find out if it is based on one incident or an ongoing personality conflict.

Follow-up actions — Acknowledge the issue and determine what options are available. Perhaps you can introduce another partner or staff who can serve the client. If you are in a small firm and you do not have that option, you need to change the behavior. If you do not change the behavior, the client may leave.

Regarding positive feedback

When coaching attorneys on business development, the importance of leveraging existing relationships to expand their network of contacts can't be stressed enough. Although lawyers see the logic, many are uncomfortable asking clients for referrals, and some feel it is presumptuous. Others simply don't know how to bring it up.

The fact is glowing feedback from a client satisfaction survey sets the stage to appropriately ask for referrals. You can turn positive client survey feedback into more business using a practical three-step process. Here is how.

• Personally call the client within one week: The servicing partner should call the client personally to thank them for taking the time to do the survey, and to let them know how pleased you are with their feedback.

This call not only reminds them of their satisfaction, but also gives an opportunity to discuss how the relationship may be expanded.

• Ask the client to be a reference: One month later, call the client again. Remind them of their positive survey feedback and ask if they would act as a reference. This is a reasonable and appropriate next step.

Also, ask if they would provide a testimonial. Happy clients are usually happy to oblige.

• Ask for an introduction: A month or two later, ask the client if he would introduce you to one of his contacts. If you are uncomfortable asking for an introduction, ask for guidance on how you might reach out and meet new people and be more effective in building your practice. Your client is a businessperson, like you. It stands to reason that they would have advice.

Of course, what we really hope for is that they will say, "You know what, I know some people you should meet. Let me set it up." Then it is your job to follow up and make sure the introduction happens.

These follow up strategies for both negative and positive survey feedback work because each step is practical and honorable. The bottom line is this: If you are clear about your strategy and organized in your implementation of client satisfaction surveys, you will have much greater success in strengthening client loyalty and building your book of business.

Jeffrey Miiller is a consultant with Kohn Communications. The firm coaches hundreds of lawyers across the country each month, via telephone, in rainmaking and client relations. He can be reached at (310) 652-1442 or at www.kohncommunications.com.